



## **Towards “A Church that Is for the Poor and with the Poor”**

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Soon after Pope Francis was elected the 266<sup>th</sup> Successor of Peter in March 2013, he took many a pandit by surprise by announcing that he wanted to see “a Church that is poor and for the poor.” Developments since then make it abundantly clear that this proclamation was not just a pious wish, but rather his definitive vision for the Church. He wanted the Church really to be poor and for the poor. He wanted the Church to identify itself with the poor and work for the poor to eliminate poverty or at least alleviate it.

In delineating this programme of action of his papacy, the Pope was not pushing his own personal agenda. Rather he was reaffirming what the Church always stood for, or, at least, expected to. There is an inseparable bond between the Church and Christian poverty. The Incarnation wherein God emptied himself to become a human person, the birth of the Son of God in an addressless manger, etc., were clear indicators of Christ’s choice of the nature of the Church.

Indeed, the Holy Family at Nazareth was a paradigm example of a life of Christian poverty. The Beatitudes, in which Christ presented his kingdom manifesto, opens its list proclaiming “Blessed are the poor, theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.” So many scriptural passages are never tired of affirming the same theme. The Apostles preached and lived a life of Christian poverty. As we know, St. Peter prefaced the very first miracle performed in the Church by proclaiming a Church that is poor: “Gold and silver I do not have.” The Acts of the Apostle, particularly chapters 2 and 4, tell us that the early Christians gave an authentic example of the life of Christian poverty by sharing whatever they had and caring for each other. The history of the Catholic Church, especially of Religious Orders and Congregations, takes pride in having produced greats like Francis of Assisi who embraced “Lady Poverty,” and St. Ignatius Loyola who loved poverty “as a mother.”

However, this spirit of poverty began to erode with the Edict of the Emperor Constantine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and consequent politicization of Church institution and leadership. The Church got trapped by the Feudalistic structures of Medieval Europe, with their overemphasis on an otherworldly spirituality, and their vulnerability to this-worldly perishable wealth and rigid formality. In some ways this unfortunate tradition has continued, and in some cases has become a source of scandal as was recently reported in the case of the Bishop of Limburg, Franz Peter Tebartz-van Elst, who was taken to task for squandering a whopping over Rs. 250 crores (€31m) on renovating his official residence. Pope Francis’ emphasis on building a Church that is poor and for the poor is a valiant and timely attempt to recapture the original authentic spirit of Christianity and to undo the terrible harm that has been done to the Church through past deviations from it.

It is very clear that Pope Francis wants caring to and sharing with the poor to be the distinguishing mark of the Catholic Church today. Two thousand years ago Christ gave his clear statement on the distinguishing mark of a Christian: “By this shall people know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” For Francis in our contemporary world this Christian love becomes concrete primarily in our love and service of the poor and the underprivileged.

Building up a Church that is poor and for the poor means getting rid of all forms of worldliness because, as Pope Francis affirmed in his address at Assisi, worldliness is an “idol” that seeks happiness “in objects rather than in relationship with God and others, “by allowing patterns of materialism “to captivate our lives and distort our humanity.”

Being a Church that is poor means adopting a life of simplicity. Mahatma Gandhi has said: “The world has enough to meet the need of humans, but not enough to meet their greed.” We are called upon to say a sincere yes to genuine needs and an emphatic no to all forms of greed. It also means joyfully placing ourselves at the service of our brothers and sisters, after the example of Jesus who came to serve, not to be served. In early January 2014, while announcing the names of the 19 new Cardinals, the Pope reminded the “princes of the Church” of this uniquely Christian understanding of authority as service. “The cardinalship does not imply promotion,” he wrote. “It is neither an honor nor a decoration; it is simply a service that requires you to broaden your gaze and open your hearts. They were asked to be on guard against “any expression of worldliness or any form of celebration contrary to the evangelical spirit of austerity, sobriety and poverty.”

Forming a Church that is poor also implies taking a humble and non-authoritarian attitude. The “We have it all, we know it all,” attitude is alien to this Church. On the other hand, it will be a participatory Church which encourages a “bottom up” strategy rather than a “top down” one while taking serious decisions that affect the whole community.

Again according to the Pope, creating a Church that is poor and for the poor involves liberating ourselves from the three false cultures: liberation from the culture of comfort that confines us to our own comfort zone, totally unconcerned with the needs and concerns of our brothers and sisters; liberation from the culture of waste that enslaves us to material things for our own selfish pleasure; and finally liberation from the culture of indifference that desensitizes us to the pains and sufferings of our brothers and sisters around.

At the same time it is important to keep in mind that the creation of a Church that is poor involves no romanticization of poverty. It does not advocate destitution or deprivation of necessary material things. In fact, such deprivation of basic needs is an evil the Church wants to liberate people from. It respects genuine human material needs. Recently many eyebrows were raised when the Pope had a meeting with the president of the World Bank, Mr. Jim Yom Kia, to explore ways in which the highly resourceful World Bank could play a role in bettering the lot of the poor and the marginalized. Christian poverty is not against genuine material need, but against greed. As St. James and St. John in their Epistles have made very clear, our love and concern for the poor have to go beyond good will and kind words to concrete actions. The Pope also has the same advice to give. He himself took the initiative along this direction when he advised friends not to come for his installation as Bishop of Rome and instead give the

price of the travel as a gift to the poor. Again, he advised religious communities to make their unused institutions and facilities available to the homeless. It is reported that plans are afoot to convert the palatial mansion of the Bishop of Limburg into a refugee centre.

Embracing Christian poverty is not a sign of weakness, but of strength. It often works wonders. It produces very tangible successful results. The Pope's emphasis on embracing Christian poverty and his personal example are already having positive results. Very encouraging reports are coming from various parts of the globe. For instance, Great Britain reports that, thanks to the "Francis Effect," Church attendance in recent times has gone up by 20%. Other countries, particularly in the West, have similar experiences to recount. Recently Timothy Cardinal Dolan of New York had the following good news to share of the "Francis Effect in his highly influential archdiocese: "Crowds at Sunday masses are up, the confessional lines are longer, ... even the [Sunday] collections are going up."

All these developments are bringing a welcome wave of hope and optimism, and we can rejoice and thank the Good Lord for them. But this happy turn of events is challenging us in India to become part of this new vision or revision of our Church, institutionally and individually. The Church in India has always had a laudable record of being at the service of the poor and the marginalized. Our medical and educational institutions have been offering outstanding service nation-wide. Our social service centres, social-awareness and human rights centres, etc., have been rendering heroic service, despite stiff oppositions and threats, often at the heavy cost of severe suffering and even painful death. All these need to continue in our effort to bear authentic witness to our mission to be true followers of

Christ who sacrificed his own life at the altar of selfless service. At the same time, in recent times clearly audible murmurs are heard in some corners of our Church concerning certain deviations from the Gospel path for the sake of money and other momentary gains. The special message and example Pope Francis is placing before us as our leader should challenge us to take an honest look at our own life style and practices and to take effective steps to set aright any form of deviation from the Gospel path. This will be a good way to make the "Francis effect" more and more visible in own country and homes. 🌱